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ABSTRACT

The quality of off-campus degree programs is considered in relation to quality control models and efforts that have been used to achieve quality control, the parties responsible for quality control, the effectiveness of programs to improve the educational quality of nontraditional education, and future prospects. It is suggested that quality control efforts must reflect newly created dimensions and variables that these off-campus programs introduce so that their level of performance can be assessed accurately, and the academic quality of these programs can be addressed at the same time. It is claimed that outcomes evaluation is underdeveloped at present but that innovative efforts in this area may help improve the reputation of off-campus degree programs and further develop more nontraditional delivery systems in higher education. A shift in focus from a predominantly "process" approach in quality control efforts to a mixture of process and outcomes approaches appears to be a likely consequence of an expanded number of nontraditional programs. A key element in improving the quality of off-campus degree programs is the continued development of internal quality controls by individual colleges and universities (e.g., an extensive approval process for off-campus programs and courses; stringent standards for faculty hiring; and student evaluation of off-campus courses, faculty, and support services). It is suggested that external controls exercised by accrediting bodies and state education agencies have made a positive contribution to program quality, but colleges and universities must assume primary responsibility for maintaining quality in off-campus programs. The sequential evaluation model of the North Central Association's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education is described. A bibliography is included. (SW)

Quality control in off-campus degree programs

James P. Honan

Off-campus degree programs, among the nontraditional delivery systems in higher education experiencing significant growth, have been the subject of controversy during recent years because their separation from the home campus, and frequently the nature of instruction, can make quality control particularly difficult. State governments, national and regional accrediting associations, students, and the general public all have an interest in the quality of these programs.

What approaches to quality control have been used?

During the past few years the quality of off-campus degree programs has become the target of criticism as the number of these programs has increased (Jacobson 1977; Off-Campus . . . 1976). Several researchers have focused particularly on problems with programs offered at military bases (Bailey 1979a; Andrews 1978b; Mactaggart 1976). Quality control is difficult for all these programs because they are physically separated from sources of institutional support, such as library facilities, administrative support, student services, and full-time faculty (Georgia Professional Standards Commission 1980).

The response to these concerns has been a variety of internal and external efforts at achieving quality control. Quality control efforts and the concept of quality that serves as the foundation for such efforts must be consistent with one another; a well thought out concept of quality and an appropriate plan for quality control are both necessary to ensure continued program quality (Keeton 1974). Definitions of academic quality can be classified according to two major focal points—process and outcomes. However, the relationship between the process approach to quality and the outcomes approach is ambiguous at points and this ambiguity causes both conceptual and operational problems (Petersen 1981; Kirkwood 1981).

Process approaches have been used extensively in assessing academic programs, but outcomes approaches are still in a developmental stage. The two approaches are closely linked, but useful empirical evidence substantiating this relationship is lacking (Petersen 1981).

Off-campus degree programs introduce variables and dimensions to the education process that must be accommodated by the quality control mechanisms selected. Many concepts of academic quality developed for on-campus programs cannot be applied effectively to off-campus situations.

Standards and traditional quality control mechanism, such as credit hour specifications, qualification of faculty, degree of faculty control and review, or availability of library facilities and other learning resources have limited applicability or must be redefined

when applied to certain nontraditional degree programs (Bowen, Edelstein, and Medsker 1979, p. 107).

Nevertheless, off-campus degree programs frequently are assessed using models of quality control developed for on-campus programs because an alternative model and well defined criteria are lacking.

The benefits of the relationship with the home campus also are the subject of disagreement. In some cases a close working relationship between on- and off-campus programs has been viewed as an indication of off-campus program quality. However, some advocates of off-campus programs view these programs as so different in nature and purpose from their on-campus counterparts, that they consider close relationship no endorsement of quality (Bowen, Edelstein, and Medsker 1979).

Student perceptions of quality in off-campus programs can also differ from traditional definitions and concepts. Students in off-campus programs are likely to be returning to college or interested primarily in professional development. They often are critical of courses taught by full-time faculty from the home campus; in many cases, they consider the high quality courses taught by part-time adjunct professors who are also full-time professionals in their fields (Mingle 1978). This perception of quality is a significant factor in the design and development of quality control mechanisms for off-campus programs.

Two recent approaches illustrate how concepts of quality can be adapted for use in evaluating off-campus degree programs. Astin (1979) sets forth a concept of quality that is based on educational outcomes. "Quality is equated . . . not with physical facilities or curricula, but rather with a continuing process of critical self-examination that focuses on the institution's contribution to the student's intellectual and personal development" (p. 18). This approach clearly has direct applications to off-campus degree programs and illustrates the focus on outcomes as an indication of quality.

Scott (1980) has developed a concept of quality that attempts to link processes and outcomes. He indicates that quality:

represents the level of attainment of appropriate goals that is, effectiveness in achieving objectives. In these terms excellence means the superior attainment of valued and distinctive goals. And, while objectives vary and indicators of activity are numerous, in the final analysis quality is most often made known by an informed judgment based on shared understandings (p. 30).

This approach to quality allows for a comprehensive assessment of the value of off-campus programs.

Who has responsibility for quality control?

National and regional accrediting associations, state education agencies, individual institutions, and students all share the responsibility for quality control in off-campus degree programs. Each group has specific concerns and responds to these concerns in the form of controls.

Regional accrediting associations are responsible for seeing that adequate quality control mechanisms are being maintained by accredited institutions with off-campus programs (Andrews 1978a, p. 91). These associations have become more involved with off-campus programs in recent years and have attempted to tailor criteria and mechanisms for these programs.

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Off-campus programs operating across state and regional lines pose special logistical problems for quality control efforts. Regional accrediting bodies and state education agencies share the responsibility for monitoring out-of-state operations, but their roles differ slightly. Accrediting associations have a role in the geographical movements of out-of-state institutions only when academic program quality is in question. More direct regulation and control of out-of-state institutions is exercised by state education agencies and institutional governing boards (Andrews 1978a).

The concerns expressed by state education agencies regarding off-campus quality control reflect their roles in the licensure and approval of programs and the distribution of student financial aid. Bowen, Edelstein, and Medsker (1979) identify the sources of interest of state officials in the quality of nontraditional programs as "(1) a concern for the proliferation of nontraditional programs, especially off-campus programs, and (2) pressures for increased state oversight by agencies and organizations responsible for distributing student assistance funds" (p. 107). State student financial aid agencies have expressed concern about off-campus program practices and "the apparent inability or unwillingness of institutions and voluntary accrediting bodies to assure adequate quality control" (p. 107).

Like the regional accrediting associations, the states have become more influential in off-campus programs in recent years. Although licensure and program approval policies and regulations for off-campus programs vary from state to state, they all serve as quality control mechanisms in varying degrees. Bailey (1979b) views the state role in academic quality control in these programs as vital:

I see a new awareness within state planning, coordinating, and licensing bodies of the threat to academic integrity represented by sleazy off-campus programs—programs often run with minimum supervision from out-of-state home campuses. Surely part of every statewide academic plan must include a set of standards—logical and educational—governing the right of colleges and universities to purvey educational services off campus (p. 12).

As the state role in off-campus quality control continues to evolve there is disagreement as to the appropriate level of state involvement. Many educators contend that an extensive evaluation of academic quality is outside the state's primary area of expertise (Mingle 1978).

While institutions with off-campus degree programs respond to the external controls exercised by national and regional accrediting associations and state education agencies, at the same time they are developing policies and guidelines to serve as internal quality control mechanisms. Response to external controls and the development of these internal mechanisms vary from institution to institution. Internal quality control efforts by institutions can include: (1) an extensive approval process for off-campus programs and courses; (2) stringent standards for faculty hiring; (3) student evaluation of off-campus courses, faculty, and support services; (4) a comprehensive faculty orientation to the home campus and its policies, resources, and services; (5) a plan for making appropriate library resources available to off-campus students; (6) use of institutional self-study data (Wolff 1980; Kells and Kirkwood 1979); and (7) frequent site visits by administrators.

As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, students participate in internal quality control in off-campus programs by their evaluation of courses, faculty, and support services. If students have the opportunity to make their views and concerns known to the appropriate administrators at the home campus, their evaluation can help monitor the quality of programs and alert admini-

strators to potential program weaknesses. Written surveys, formal and informal meetings, and the regular availability of administrators can provide the opportunity for this communication (Rowh 1980).

What quality control models have been developed?

Regional accrediting associations only recently have established standards for off-campus degree programs. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) was the first regional accrediting association to issue such standards, adopted in 1971 and revised in 1977. The SACS policy has helped shape standard-setting in several other regional associations (Burcaw 1979). Using their standards, SACS began in 1979 to examine the off-campus programs of each of its accredited colleges and universities in order to assess their quality.

The North Central Association's (NCA) Commission on Institutions of Higher Education has indicated that its existing policies and procedures for off-campus degree programs are sufficient for maintaining quality control and for monitoring programs within its area of responsibility. According to the Commission, its current policies have been effective in discouraging poor quality programs and in fostering the growth of high quality programs.

The NCA Commission has developed a sequential evaluation model for its institutions with off-campus degree programs. The need for this model was determined after the Commission concluded that a standard on-site evaluation consisting of an accrediting team visiting an institution for a single period of a few days was not sufficient to accurately assess an institution with off-campus programs (Thrash 1978).

The sequential evaluation model has been used for several institutions under NCA's jurisdiction. Sequential evaluation design "permits the examination of an institution by a total team and various sub-teams through a series of visits over a period of months" (Thrash 1978, p. 5). This method gives the members of accrediting teams an opportunity to visit off-campus locations and to use data obtained from these visits in overall accrediting decisions. The model also assists accrediting team members in accurately assessing the quality of off-campus programs and in determining if such programs are consistent with the mission of the institution (Thrash 1978). This evaluation model is especially appropriate for use with programs operating across state and regional lines because it fosters cooperation among the accrediting associations in addition to effectively monitoring academic quality. Thrash (1979) concluded that sequential evaluation across regions "offers the most effective means yet devised to assure the accrediting commissions, their member institutions, state approval agencies, and the public that the institution merits accreditation and that its off-campus programs are of acceptable quality" (p. 376).

How effective are quality control efforts?

As the regional accrediting associations have become more involved in off-campus programs and have tailored quality control models and mechanisms for these programs, they have contributed to improved program quality. Harclerod (1980) notes that

Significant efforts by the regional and national institutional associations have led to continued improvements in educational quality in nontraditional education. Holding accredited institutions strictly accountable for their "nontraditional" programs has cut down on their number and improved many still remaining. A number of institutions have cut back greatly on their extended campus programs. In 1980, for example, new institutions that had applied for accreditation

*David Auspuck, 1981, personal communication.

now restrict off-campus operations to their own state or to very limited activity in other states (p. 93).

Likewise, state involvement in off-campus programs has led to improved quality in these programs. The Maryland State Board for Higher Education's (1979) new standards for off-campus programs are an example of a successful state-initiated quality control effort. According to the plan, off-campus programs are approved provided they do not duplicate existing courses offered in the specific area in which they wish to operate. Once approved, a program is restricted to a designated location and a predetermined degree program; additional program and course offerings require separate approval. As a result of these stringent regulations, many out-of-state institutions discontinued operations in Maryland instead of making efforts to operate under the new standards (Harclerod 1980).

What are the prospects for quality control?

Although specific evaluative criteria have not yet been fully developed, it appears that the outcomes approach to academic quality will be used more widely to assess nontraditional delivery systems such as off-campus programs as these delivery systems become more extensive and diverse. Differences among off-campus programs and courses make strictly process approaches to quality difficult to implement. An approach that incorporates both process and outcomes should be the goal of those responsible for quality control in off-campus programs.

Changing concepts of academic quality and new mechanisms for quality control for off-campus degree programs will have an impact on traditional on-campus programs. As off-campus programs become more prevalent, the concept of "going to college" will not doubt change (Mollenhauer 1978). It is quite possible that traditional on-campus programs will be used less often as models of quality for nontraditional programs such as off-campus programs. As new quality control mechanisms and techniques are developed for specific use with off-campus degree programs, a new concept of quality might evolve that would have unique applications to these programs.

Despite the various internal and external quality control efforts described in this report, some off-campus programs of poor quality continue to be offered. Quality control efforts cannot ensure perfection. Bailey (1979b) explains that this problem affects all colleges and universities and all types of programs.

Even with conscientious attempts on the part of presidents, provosts, deans, faculty committees, and department chairmen to monitor academic quality from the inside, and various forms and intensities of external monitoring by governmental agencies and private accrediting bodies, every academic institution has had its weak instructors, gut courses, and shoddy programs (p. vi).

Conclusion

The continued expansion of off-campus degree programs and other nontraditional delivery systems in higher education will create a need for new approaches to academic quality control. Quality control efforts must reflect newly created dimensions and variables that these programs introduce so that their level of performance can be assessed accurately. Effective quality controls will help to address the concerns that have been expressed about the academic quality of these programs.

Outcomes evaluation is underdeveloped at present; innovative efforts to encourage its development would do much to bolster the reputation of off-campus degree programs and foster the development of additional nontraditional delivery systems in

higher education. A shift in focus from a predominantly process approach in quality control efforts to a mixture of process and outcomes approaches appears to be a likely consequence of expanded number of nontraditional programs.

A key element in improving the quality of off-campus degree programs is the continued development of internal quality controls by individual institutions. The external controls exercised by accrediting bodies and state education agencies have had a positive impact on the quality of these programs, but institutions should not rely solely on these external controls for assuring program quality. Colleges and universities must assume primary responsibility for maintaining quality in off-campus programs by developing and implementing innovative quality control models and mechanisms.

For further information on issues related to quality control in off-campus and on-campus programs, contact the individual regional accrediting commissions or their association, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (One Dupont Circle, Suite 760, Washington, D.C. 20036; 202/452-1433). The Office of Self-Regulation Initiatives of the American Council on Education (Elaine H. El-Khawas, director; One Dupont Circle, Suite 800, Washington, D.C. 20036; 202/833-4700) also is involved in helping institutions develop their own quality control mechanisms and standards.

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